

## Journey of New Beginnings

Good evening. Thank you all for being here. It is such a privilege to be standing in front of you, representing the class of 2008. I am greatly humbled by this honor. I have spent the past several years on this journey with my fellow classmates. I have witnessed all the hard work and sacrifice that each of them has made, and I can proudly say that I could not have had better companions on this journey of new beginnings.

This journey of new beginnings has not been easy for any of us. While the paths each of us has taken may not be exactly the same, we have all overcome countless obstacles to reach this point. Each of us has overcome not only the pitfalls and distractions of our environment, but more importantly, each of us has overcome the inner demons of self-doubt, ignorance, and complacency. We have refused to embody the stereotypes that many in society have of us. Instead, we have sought to improve ourselves and find a better way to travel life's journey. And for that, there has surely been no better map to guide us than our education.

My journey to this podium began at the age of sixteen. At that point, I was the stereotypical, rebellious teenager. I naively thought that I knew everything about life. I strayed away from the teachings of my parents and I thought only of roaming the streets with my friends. It was then that I stumbled down the path that ultimately led to my imprisonment like a car accident that suddenly shatters the silence of a day, one instant changed my life and the lives of so many others. As the shock from that sad day cleared from my mind, a newfound clarity took its place. With that clarity came a flood of thoughts and emotions that crashed in to my awareness. Horror, remorse, shame and sorrow, filled me to bursting. Then gradually, joining them were anger: anger at my recklessness, and resolve: resolve never to lose my way again.

I could clearly see that many of the choices I made were not based on common sense, nor from the lessons and values that my parents had taught me. I knew that somewhere along my journey, I had gone astray. I knew that I needed to make many changes in the course of my life.

These changes were not easy in the making. It is said that no person is an island and that everyone interacts with others in some way. Things were no different for me. While I wandered through what seemed a maze of crisscrossing roads, others who had successfully found their way gave me helpful directions. Without the help of my family and other good people in my life, I could not have made it to this day. Many of the good people I am speaking about, I met right here in Sing Sing. Many of them are sitting right here in this front row and among you in this audience. These generous people encouraged me to pursue an education, and to make use of the various programs of self-improvement and rehabilitation. They steered me clear of the traps of prison life, they gave me hope when times were hard, and they stood as outstanding examples for me to follow. I will be forever grateful to all the people who helped me make the necessary positive changes in my life.

And positive change... isn't that what education is all about? This program has proven the tremendous value of education. This program has proven that education liberates the mind. Education expands our minds, and once expanded by new ideas, new cultures, and new skills, we cannot remain on the same path we had been following. Education has given us the opportunity

to transform our lives. Education has become our passports; passports that opened new roads for us to travel.

Students of this program have proven how education can serve as passports to new beginnings. Some of them are now home and through their desire to share their knowledge and help others, many have gone on to become educators themselves. Still others who have not yet gone home, demonstrate daily the positive effects of a college education. They are the living proof that education truly sets the stage for new beginnings. And just Re them, there is not a single shred of doubt in my mind, that my fellow graduates, this class of 2008, will also continue to demonstrate the life altering power of education. Families, friends, and supporters, look forward to seeing and hearing of the accomplishments of this class. Your confidence and faith in us will bear fruit!

Fellow graduates, the degrees we are to receive are not merely slips of paper. Our degrees represent our years of hard work and study. Our degrees represent not only our determination to overcome all of the negative stereotypes and other obstacles in our paths, but also our degrees represent the faith that our supporters have put in us. Our degrees represent all of the knowledge, the skills, and the self-discipline that we have acquired throughout our years of study. Our degrees are the springboards for our hopes and dreams; our passports to new beginnings.

The skills and disciplines we have acquired on this journey have empowered us to become contributors to society. Within each of us is the power to change society. Let us use what we have learned not just for ourselves, but also for the benefit of others. Let us use our hard-earned knowledge to transform the world for the better. Let us give guidance to others on their journeys. Let us be the trailblazers who clear open trails so that others may follow our footsteps without stumbling on the same snares that we stumbled on.

Fellow graduates, let our degrees, and the actions they inspire, proclaim to the world that we are no longer walking the roads of our pasts. Let our actions proclaim to the world that we are no longer drifting without direction. Let our actions proclaim to the world that we are the class of 2008, graduates of Mercy College. We have found our way and today is only a new beginning in our journey!

So many people deserve our thanks for helping us to this day. Everyone from Mercy College and Hudson Link, and all of the supporters of Hudson link whose support makes this momentous day possible. Ms. Arlene Mohammed, our academic coordinator, who tirelessly works on our behalf and ensures that we have everything we need, and that we always give our best. All of the professors who sacrifice their time to come here and share their knowledge with us. Commissioner Fischer, whose support was and continues to be vital to this program. Superintendent Marshall and the Executive Team who graciously allow this program to flourish here at Sing Sing. And most importantly, all of our families and friends, whose unending love and support gives us the strength and inspiration to get through each day.

I would like to end with a few words for my family. Your love and support have been constant in my life. Even as I pushed you away, you held me closer. You never gave up on me. Words cannot express the love and appreciation I have for you. To my brothers, you guys were just little kids when I came here, and now, both of you are grown men. I am sorry that I was not out there

to be the big brother that I should have been. I hope you look on this day and feel proud to say that I am your big brother, just as I have always been proud of you both. I hope all the English speakers will excuse me, but I must address my parents. (Korean)... you have gone through so much over the years because of me, yet not once has your love and support ever wavered. This day is for you, and I promise that it will not be the last.

-Tae Wook Yoon